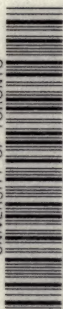


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AKRA THE SLAVE



~~AKRA~~
AKRA THE SLAVE

BY
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*Six years ago, I wrote this story down,
While yet the light of Eastern skies
Was in my eyes,
And still my heart, aglow with memories
Of sun-enraptured seas,
And that old sea-girt town,
Where, down dark alleys of enchanted night,
We stole, until we came
To where the great dome glimmered white,
And every minaret,
A shaft of pearly flame,
Beneath the cloudy moon . . .*

*Six years ago !
Ah ! soon—too soon,
Our tale, too, will be told :
And yet, and yet,
From this old Eastern tale we know,
Love's story never can grow old,
Till Love, himself, forget.*

1910.

AKRA THE SLAVE

HE thought to see me tremble
And totter as an oar-snapt reed,
When he spake death to me—
My courage, toppled in the dust,
Even as the head of cactus
The camel-keeper slashes
That his beasts may browse, unscathed,
The succulent, wounded green.
He thought to have me, broken,
And grovelling at his feet ;
Mouthing and mumbling to his sandal-ties,
In stammering dread of death—
Aye ! even as a king,
Who, having from death's hand,
Received his crown and kingdom,
For ever treads in terror of the hour
When death shall jog his elbow,
Twitch the purple from his shoulders,
And claim again the borrowed crown.
But, little need have I to fear
The crouching, lean camp-follower,
Unto whose ever-gaping maw,
Day after day, I flung
The spoils of bow and arrow,
Ere I was taken captive—
I, who have often, at my mother's breast,

AKRA THE SLAVE

Awakened in the night-time,
To see death leering on me from the cave-mouth,
A gaunt and slinking shape
That snuffed the dying embers,
Blotting out the friendly stars—
I, who, a scarce-weaned boy,
Have toddled, gay and fearless,
Down the narrow jungle-track,
Through bodeful forest-darkness, panther-eyed ;
And have felt cold snakes uncoiling
And gliding 'neath my naked sole,
From clammy slumber startled ;
While, with sharp snap and crackle,
Beast-trodden branches strained behind me,
My father's hand scarce snatching me
Before the spring of crouching death !
But, naught of this the King could know,
He only knew that, on that far-off morning,
When first I came before him, captive,
Among my captive brothers,
And, as he lightly held, in idle fingers,
Above my unbowed head,
In equal poise
Death's freedom
Or the servitude of life,
I clutched at life :
And cared but little that his lips
Should curl, to see me, broken,
A slave among his slaves.
Yet, never slave of his was I ;
Nor did I take my new life from his nod—
I . . . I who could have torn
The proud life out of him,

AKRA THE SLAVE

Before his guards could stay me . . .
Had she not sat beside him, on her throne.

And he, who knew not then,
Nor ever, till to-day,
Has known me aught but slave,
Remembering that time,
Spake doom of death to me,
Idly, as to a slave :
And I await the end of night,
And dawn of death,
Even as a slave awaits . . .
Nay ! as the unvanquished veteran
Awaits the hour of victory.

In silence, wheels the night,
Star-marshalled, over dreaming Babylon ;
And none in all the sleeping city stirs,
Save the cloaked sentries on the outer walls
Who tread out patience 'twixt the gates of brass,
Numb with scarce-baffled slumber,
Or, maybe, some unsleeping priest of Bel,
A lonely warder of eternity,
Who watches on the temple's seventh stage,
With the unslumbering gods.
Yet, may not she, the Queen,
Whose beauty, slaying my body,
Brings my soul to immortal birth,
Although she does not know
Of my last vigil on the peak of life—
Yet, may not she awaken, troubled
By strange, bewildering dreams,
With heart a little fearful of the dawn

AKRA THE SLAVE

Of day, yet unrevealed ?

There is no sound at all,
Save only the cool plashing
Of fountains in the courtyard
Without my lonely cell :
For fate has granted to me
This last, least consolation of sweet sound :
Though in the plains I perish,
I shall hear the noise of waters,
The noise of running waters,
As I die.

My earliest lullaby shall sing
My heart again to slumber.
And, even now, I hear
Stream-voices, long-forgotten, calling me
Back to the hills of home ;
And, dreaming, I remember
The little yellow brooks
That ever, day and night,
Gush down the mountains singing,
Singing by the caves :
And hearkening unto them,
Once more a tiny baby,
A wee brown fist I dabble
In the foaming cool,
Frothing round my wrist,
Spurting up my arm,
Spraying my warm face ;
And then again I chuckle,
As I see an empty gourd,
Fallen in the swirling waters,
Bobbing on the tawny eddies,

AKRA THE SLAVE

Swiftly out of sight.

And yet most clearly to remembrance comes
That far-off night, in early Spring,
When, loud with melted snow from Northern peaks,
The torrent roared and fretted ;
While, couched within the cavern,
The clamour kept me wakeful ;
And, even when I slept,
Tumbled, tumultuous, through my dreams,
And seemed to surge about me,
As the brawl of armèd men.
And once I sprang from slumber,
Hot and startled,
Dreaming that I felt
A warm breath on my cheek,
As if a jackal nuzzled me ;
Or some dread, slinking foe
Made certain of my sleeping
Before he plunged the steel.
But nothing stirred within the glimmering cavern,
Where, all around me, lay my sleeping kindred ;
And, when I stole without, with noiseless footsteps,
To rouse the smouldering watchfire into flame,
And cast fresh, crackling brushwood on the blaze,
I caught no glint of arms betwixt the branches,
Nor any sound or rumour, save
The choral noise of cold hill-waters,
Cold hill-waters singing,
Singing to the stars.
And so I turned me from the brooding night ;
And, couched again upon the leopard-skins,
I slept, till dawn, in dream-untroubled sleep.

AKRA THE SLAVE

I woke to see the cold sky kindling red,
Beyond the mounded ash of the spent fire ;
And lay, a moment, watching
The pearly light, caught, trembling,
In dewy-beaded spiders' webs
About the cave-mouth woven.
Then I arose ;
And left my kindred, slumbering—
My mother, by my father,
And, at her breast, her youngest babe,
With dimpled fingers clutching at her bosom ;
And, all around them, lying
Their sons and daughters, beautiful in sleep,
With parted lips,
And easy limbs outstretched
Along the tumbled bedskins :
And while they slumbered yet in shades of night,
I sprang out naked
Into eager dawn.
The sun had not yet scaled the eastern ridge :
And still the vales were hidden from my eyes
By snowy wreaths of swathing mist :
But, high upon a scar
That jutted sheer and stark,
In cold grey light,
There stood an antelope,
With lifted muzzle snuffing the fresh day ;
When scenting me afar,
He plunged into the mist
With one quick, startled bound :
And, from the smoking vapour,
Arose a gentle pattering,
As, down the rocky trail,

AKRA THE SLAVE

The unseen herd went trotting
Upon their leader's heels.
And from the clear horizon
The exultant sun sprang god-like :
And on a little mound I stood,
With eager arms outstretched,
That, over my cold body,
The first warm golden beams
Of his life-giving light might fall.
And thus, awhile, I stood,
In radiant adoration tranced,
Until I caught the call of waters ;
And, running downwards to the stream,
That plunged into a darkling pool,
Where, in the rock was scooped a wide, deep basin ;
Upon the glassy brink,
A moment, I hung, shivering,
And gazing down through deeps of lucent shadow ;
And then I leapt headlong,
And felt the cloven waters
Closing, icy-cold, above me,
And, again, with sobbing breath,
Battled to the light and air :
And I ran into the sunshine,
Shaking from my tingling limbs
Showers of scintillating drops
Over radiant, dewy beds
Of the snowy cyclamen,
And dark-red anemone,
Till my tawny body glowed
With warm, ruddy, pulsing life.
And then again I sought the stream,
And plunged ; and now, more boldly,

AKRA THE SLAVE

I crossed the pool, with easy stroke ;
And climbed the further crag ;
And, turning, plunged again.
And so, I dived and swam,
Till pangs of hunger pricked
My idle fancy homeward :
And eagerly I climbed the hill ;
When, not a sling's throw from the cavern,
Stooping to pluck a red anemone,
To prank the wet, black tangle of my hair,
I heard a shout ;
And looking up,
I saw strange men
With lifted spears
Bear down on me :
And as I turned,
A javelin sang
Above my shrinking shoulder,
And bit the ground before me.
But, swift as light I sped,
Until I reached the pool,
And leapt therein :
And he who pressed most hotly on my heels,
Fell stumbling after.
Still I never slackened,
Although I heard a floundering splash,
And then the laughter of his comrades :
And, as I swam for life,
Betwixt my thrusting heels,
Another spear that clove the crystal waters
Glanced underneath my body,
And in the stream-bed quivered bolt upright,
Caught in a cleft of rock.

AKRA THE SLAVE

With frantic arm I struck
Straight as a snake across the pool,
And climbed the further bank ;
And plunging through deep brake,
Ran wildly onward,
Startling as I went
A browsing herd of antelope,
That, bounding, fled before me down the valley :
And after them I raced,
As though the hunter,
Not the hunted,
Until the chase sang in my blood,
And braced my straining thews.
I knew not if men followed,
Yet, on I sped, impetuously,
As speeds the fleet-foot onaga,
That breasts the windy morning,
With lifted head, and nostrils wide,
Exultant in his youth.
So, on and ever on,
Scarce knowing why I ran—
Enough for me to feel
Earth beaten back behind my heels,
And hear the loud air singing
The blood-song in my ears :
Till, stumbling headlong over
An unseen, fallen branch,
I rolled in a deep bed of withered leaves ;
And lay, full-length in shuddering ecstasy
Of hot, tumultuous blood that rioted
Through every throbbing vein.
But when again, I breathed more easily,
And my wild, fluttering heart kept slower beat,

AKRA THE SLAVE

Hot-foot, my thoughts ran, wondering, backward :
And I arose and followed them
With swift and stealthy pace,
Until I reached the stream.
Along the bank I stole with wary step,
Until I came to where the waters
Narrowed, raging through a gorge,
Nigh the threshold of my home :
And across the thunderous flood,
From crag to crag I leapt :
And then I climbed a cedar,
From whose close ambush I could watch
Who came or went about the cavern-mouth.
I lay along a level branch :
And, through the thick, dark screen,
I peered with eager eyes :
But no one crossed my sight.
The whole land lay before me, drowsing
In deepest noonday slumber :
No twig stirred in the breathless blaze ;
And underneath the boughs no serpent rustled :
And, in the earth and air,
Naught waked, save one lone eagle, nigh the sun,
With wings, unbaffled, beating
Up the blue, unclouded heavens.
A dreamless, suave security
Seemed brooding o'er the valley's golden slumber,
Whence rang or flashed no hint of lurking peril.
I dropped to earth,
And crouching low,
I stole yet nearer
Through the brake :
Till, drawing nigh the cavern-mouth,

AKRA THE SLAVE

I heard the sound of half-hushed sobbing :
And then I saw, within the gloom,
My mother and my sisters clustering round
My father's body, lying stark and dead,
A spear-wound in his breast.
And as I crept to them, they did not hear me,
Nor ever lift their heads ;
But, shuddering, crouched together,
With drooping breasts half-hid in falling hair,
By that familiar form
In such strange slumber bound.
Only the baby, on her shoulder slung,
Saw me, and crowed me greeting,
As I stooped down to touch my weeping mother,
Who, turning suddenly,
With wild tear-fevered eyes ;
Arose with whispered warning ;
But, even then, too late.
Already, from behind,
Around my throat
An arm was flung ;
And heavily I fell :
Yet, with a desperate wrench,
I slipped the clutch of my assailant :
And picking up a slingstone that lay handy,
I crashed it through his helm ;
And dead he dropped.
And now upon me all his fellows thronged,
Like hounds about an antelope ;
And gripped my naked limbs,
And dragged me down,
A struggling beast, among them :
And desperately I fought,

AKRA THE SLAVE

As fights the boar at bay,
When all the yelling pack,
With lathered lips, and white teeth gnashing,
Is closing in upon him ;
And in his quivering flank, and gasping throat,
He feels the fangs of death :
Till, overcome at last,
They bound me hand and foot,
With knotted, leathern thongs ;
And dragged me out to where, beneath the trees,
Trussed in like manner, with defiant eyes,
My brothers lay, already, side by side.
They laid me in the shade ;
And flicked my wincing spirit
With laughter and light words :
“ Now is the roe-buck taken ! ”
Then another,
On whose dark, sullen face there burned a livid weal :
“ A buck in flight ’s a panther brought to bay ! ”
And then his fellow :
“ True enough ! and yet,
For such young thews they give good gold—
They give good gold in Babylon ! ”
And, laughing thus, they left us,
To lie through hours of aching silence,
Until, at length, the cool of evening fell ;
When they returned from slumber ;
And loosed the ankle-cords that we might stand ;
And bade our mother feed us ;
And she, with tender fingers, held
The milk-bowl to our parching lips ;
And thrust dried dates betwixt our teeth ;
And wept, to see us standing there,

AKRA THE SLAVE

With helpless hands, before her.
Then, bringing out their mules, they saddled them ;
And tied us to the girths on either hand.
They drove my weeping sisters from the cavern ;
And sought to tear my mother from her home ;
But she escaped them ;
And they let her bide
Amid the ruins of her life,
Whose light had dropped, so suddenly,
From out the highest heavens :
And, when I turned to look on her,
And win from her a last farewell,
I saw her, sitting desolate betwixt
Her silent husband and her wailing babe,
With still, strange eyes,
That stared upon the dead, unseeing,
While her own children went from her,
Scarce knowing that they left her, nevermore
To look upon her face.

Thus, we set out, as over
The darkening, Southern crags
The new moon's keen, curved blade was thrust :
My sisters trooping on before us,
Like a drove of young gazelles,
Which, in the dead of night,
With pards in leash, and torches flaring,
The hunters have encompassed.
They moved with timid steps,
And little runs ;
Stumbling, with stifled cries ;
And starting, panic-shot,
From every lurking shadow—

AKRA THE SLAVE

Behind them, terror's lifted lash :
Before them, ever crouching,
The horror of the unknown night—
While, as they moved before us,
The moonlight shivered off their shrinking shoulders
And naked, glancing limbs,
In shimmering, strange beauty.
And closely on their heels,
I, with my brothers, foremost in the file,
Marched, tethered 'twixt the plodding beasts,
Whose stolid riders sat,
Each with his javelin on the pummel couched,
In watchful silence, with dark eyes alert.
And once, nigh driven crazy
By the tugging of the thongs,
I sprang into the air,
As down a rocky steep we scrambled ;
And strove to burst the galling bonds,
Or hurl my guards on one another ;
But, all too sure of foot, the beasts,
And too securely girths and cords
Held me, and I stumbled.
Instantly a thong
Struck my wincing shoulders,
Blow on thudding blow.
I bit my lips ; and strode on silently ;
Nor fought again for freedom.
So on we journeyed through the night,
And down familiar mountain-tracks,
Through deep, dark forest,
Ever down and down ;
Fording the streams, whose moon-bright waters flowed,
In eddies of delicious, aching cool,

AKRA THE SLAVE

About our weary thighs.
And, once, when in mid-torrent,
That swirled, girth-high about the plunging beasts,
A startled otter, glancing
Before their very hoofs,
Affrighted them ; and, rearing,
With blind and desperate floundering,
They nearly dragged us down to death :
And, ere we righted,
With a fearful cry,
My eldest sister from the bevy broke ;
And struck down-stream
With wild arm lashing desperately,
Until the current caught her ;
And she sank, to rise no more.
And on again we travelled,
Down through the darkling woodlands :
And once I saw green, burning eyes,
Where, on a low-hung bough,
A night-black panther crouched,
As though to pounce upon my sisters ;
But, the sudden crack of whips,
Startling him, he snarled ;
And turned with lashing tail,
Crashing through dense brushwood.

When, once, again we came unto a clearing,
The night was near its noon :
And all the vales that lay before us
Were filled with moving, moonlit mists,
That seemed phantasmal waters
Of that enchanted world,
Where we, in dreams, sail over still lagoons,

AKRA THE SLAVE

Throughout eternal night,
And under unknown stars.
Still, on we fared, unresting,
Until the low moon paled ;
When, halting on a mountain-spur,
We first looked down on Babylon,
Far in the dreaming West,
A cluster of dim towers,
Scarce visible to wearied eyes.
We camped within a sheltering cedar-grove ;
And all the day, beneath the level boughs,
Upon the agelong-bedded needles lay,
Half-slumbering, with fleeting, fretful dreams
That could not quite forget the chafing cords,
That held our arms in aching numbness :
But, ere the noon, in sounder sleep I sank,
Dreaming I floated on a still, deep pool,
Beneath dark, overhanging branches ;
And seemed to feel upon my cheek
The cool caress of waters ;
While, far above me, through the night of trees,
Noon glimmered faintly as the glint of stars.
As thus I lay, in indolent ecstasy,
O'er me, suddenly, the waters
Curved, and I was dragged,
Down and down,
Through gurgling deeps
Of swirling, drowning darkness. . .
When I awoke in terror ;
And strove to sit upright ;
But, tautly, with a jerk,
The thongs that held me to my brothers,
Dragged me back to earth.

AKRA THE SLAVE

Awhile I lay, with staring eyes, awake,
Watching a big, grey spider, crouched o'erhead,
In ambush 'neath a twig, beside her web,
Oft sallying out, to bind yet more securely,
'The half-entangled flies.

And then, once more, I slumbered ;
And dreamed a face leant over me,
More fair than any face
My waking eyes had ever looked upon.

Its beauty burned above me,
Not dusky like my sisters' faces,
But pale as the wan moon,
Reflected in a flood
Of darkly flowing waters,
Or as the creaming froth,
That, born amid the thunder of the fall,
Floats on the river's bosom in the sunshine,
Bubble after bubble,
Perishing in air.

So, a moment, over me,
With frail and fleeting glimmer
Of strange elusive, evanescent light,
The holy vision hovered.

And yet, whenever, with a fervent longing,
I sought to look into the darkling eyes,
The face would fade from me,
As foam caught in an eddy :

Until, at last, I wakened,
And, wondering, saw a pale star gleaming
Betwixt the cedar-branches.

And soon our captors stirred :
And we arose, to see
The walls and towers of Babylon, dark

AKRA THE SLAVE

Against the clear rose of the afterglow,
Already in the surge of shadows caught,
As night, beneath us, slowly Westward swept,
Flooding the dreaming plain that lay before us,
Vast, limitless, bewildering,
And strange to mountain-eyes.
As down the slope we went,
And when, at last, we left behind
The hills and singing waters,
A vague, oppressive fear
Of those dim, silent leagues of level land,
Fell on me ; and I almost seemed
To bear upon my shoulders
The vaster dome of overwhelming night ;
And, trembling like a child,
I looked askance at my two captors,
As they rode on in heedless silence,
Their swarthy faces sharp
Against the lucent sky.
And then, once more,
The old, familiar watchfires of the stars
Brought courage to my bosom ;
And the young moon's brilliant horn
Was exalted in the sky :
And soon, the glooming wilderness
Awoke with glittering waters,
As a friendly wind sang unto me
Among the swaying reeds :
While, cloud on cloud,
The snowy flocks of pelican
Before our coming rose ;
And, as they swerved to Southward,
The moonlight shivered off their flashing pinions.

AKRA THE SLAVE

So, on we marched, till dawn, across the plain ;
And, on and on,
Beneath the waxing moon,
Each night we travelled Westward ;
Until, at last, we halted
By the broad dull-gleaming flood
Of mighty, roaring Tigris ;
And aroused from midnight slumber
The surly, grumbling ferrymen,
And crossed the swollen waters
Upon the great, skin rafts :
Then on again we fared,
Until the far, dim towers soared in the dawnlight ;
And we encamped beside a stream,
Beneath dry, rustling palms.
And heavily I slumbered :
And only wakened once, at noon,
When, lifting up my head,
I saw the towers of Babylon, burning blue,
Far off, in the blind heat :
And slept again, till sunset,
When we took our Westward course
Along the low bank of a broad canal,
That glimmered wanly 'neath a moonless sky.
Higher, and higher still,
As we drew slowly nearer,
Arose the vasty walls and serried towers,
That seemed to thrust among the stars,
And on embattled summits bear the night,
Unbowed beneath their burden,
As easily as, with unruffled brows,
And limber, upright bodies,
The village-daughters carry

AKRA THE SLAVE

At eve the brimming pitchers,
Poised upon their heads.
And when, above us, the wide-looming walls
Shut out the Western stars ;
Beneath their shade, at midnight, we encamped,
To await till dawn should open
The city gates for us.
That night we did not sleep,
But, crouched upon the ground,
We watched the moon rise over Babylon,
Till, far behind us, o'er the glittering waste,
Was flung the wall's huge shadow,
And the moving shades of sentries,
Who, unseen above our heads,
Paced through the night incessantly.
Thus long we sat, hushed with awed expectation,
And gazing o'er the plain that we had travelled,
As, gradually, the climbing moon,
Escaping from the clustering towers,
Revealed far-gleaming waters,
And the sharp, shrill cry of owls,
Sweeping by on noiseless plumes,
Assailed the vasty silence,
Shivering off like darts
From some impenetrable shield.
And, as we waited,
Sometimes, fearfully,
I gazed up those stupendous, soaring walls
Of that great, slumbering city, wondering
What doom behind the bastioned ramparts slept,
What destiny, beneath the brooding night,
Awaited me beyond the brazen gates.
But, naught the blind, indifferent stars revealed,

AKRA THE SLAVE

Though towards the long night's ending,
Half-dazed with gazing up that aching height,
A drowsiness fell over me,
And in a restless waking-trance I lay,
Dreaming that Life and Death before me stood.
And, as each thrust towards me a shrouded cup,
Implacable silence bade me choose and drink.
But, as I stretched a blind, uncertain hand
To take the cup of death,
I wakened, and dawn trembled,
At last, beyond the Eastern hills,
And, star by star, night failed ;
And eagerly the sun leapt up the sky,
And, as his flashing rays
Smote kindling towers and flaming gates of brass,
Across the reedy moat
A clattering drawbridge fell,
And wide the glittering portals slowly swung :
And there came streaming out in slow procession
A sleepy caravan of slouching camels,
Groaning and grumbling as they strode along
Beneath their mountainous burdens,
Upon whose swaying summits,
Impassively, the blue-robed merchants sat.
They passed us slowly by,
And then we took the bridge,
And, while our captors parleyed with the guards,
Who stood, on either hand,
With naked swords,
I turned my head,
And saw for the last time, far Eastward,
The cold, snow-brilliant peaks,
Beyond my dim, blue, native hills.

AKRA THE SLAVE

And, as I looked, my thoughts flew homeward,
And I, one dreaming moment,
Stood by my mourning mother in the cavern
Of desolation, looking on the dead.
And then, between the brazen gate-posts,
And underneath the brazen lintel,
At last we entered Babylon.
Before us, yet another wall arose,
And, turning sharply
Down a narrow way,
The living breath of heaven seemed shut from us
As though beneath the beetling crags
Of some deep mountain-gorge—
By cliffs of wall, on either hand,
That soared up to the narrow sky,
Which with dim lustre lit
The shimmering surface of enamelled brick,
Whereon, through giant groves,
Blue-coated hunters chased the boar,
Or 'loosed red-tasselled falcon
After flying crane.
But soon we reached another gate,
Sword-guarded, and we entered,
And plunged into the traffic
Of clamorous merchantmen,
Speeding their business ere the heat of day.
And as we jostled, slowly,
Through bewildering bazaars,
The porters and the idler wayfarers
All turned to look upon our shame,
With cold, unpitying eyes,
And indolent, gaping mouths,
Or jested with our captors,

AKRA THE SLAVE

Until we left the busier thoroughfares,
And walked through groves of cypress and of ilex,
Where not a sound or rumour troubled
The silence of the dark-plumed boughs
And glimmering deeps of peace,
Save only the cool spurt of waters
That, from a myriad unseen jets,
Fretted the crystal airs of morning,
And fell in frolic showers
Of twinkling, rainbow drops,
That plashed in unseen basins ;
And through the blaze of almond-orchards,
Tremulous with blossom
That flickered in a rosy, silken snow
Of falling petals over us,
And wreathed about our feet
In soft and scented drifts ;
Beneath pomegranate trees in young, green leaf,
And through vast gardens, glowing with strange flowers,
Such as no April kindled into bloom
Among the valleys of my native hills.
We came unto a court of many fountains,
Where, leaping off their jaded mules,
Our captors loosed the thongs that held us,
But left our wrists still bound.
And one with great clay pitchers came,
And over our hot bodies, travel-stained,
Poured out cool, cleansing waters
In a gurgling, crystal stream,
And flung coarse robes of indigo
About our naked shoulders.
And here we left behind us
The maidens and the younger boys,

AKRA THE SLAVE

And passing through a gateway,
Came out upon a busy wharf,
Where, southward, midway through the city,
The broad Euphrates flows,
His dark flood thronged with merchant-dhows,
And fishing-boats of reed and bitumen,
Piled high with glistening barbel, freshly-caught ;
And foreign craft, with many-coloured sails,
And laden deep with precious merchandise,
That, over wide, bewildering waters,
Across the perilous world,
The adventurous, dark-bearded mariners,
Who swear by unknown gods in alien tongues,
Bring ever to the gates of Babylon.
We crossed the drawbridge, round whose granite piers
Swirled strong, Spring-swollen waters,
Loud and tawny,
And, through great brazen portals,
Passed within the palace gates,
When first I saw afar the hanging-gardens,
Arch on arch,
And tier on tier,
Against a glowing sky.
Two strapping Nubians, like young giants
Hewn from blue-black marble
By some immortal hand in immemorial ages,
Led us slowly onward.
The dappled pard-skins, slung across their shoulders,
Scarcely hid the ox-like thews,
Beneath the dark skin rippling,
As they strode along before us.
Through courts of alabaster,
And painted corridors,

AKRA THE SLAVE

And chambers fair with flowery tapestries
They led us, wondering, till at last we came
Into a vast, dim hall of glimmering gold,
The end of all our journeying.
And, as we halted on the threshold,
My eyes could see but little for a moment,
In the dusky, heavy air,
Through the ceaseless cloud of incense,
Rising from the smouldering braziers
To the gold, grey-clouded dome,
Tingling strangely in my nostrils,
As I came from morning airs ;
Then slowly filling them with drowsy fume,
When, looking up with half-dazed eyes,
I saw the King upon his golden throne :
And through my body
Raged rebellious blood,
In baffled riot beating
At my corded wrists,
As if to burst the galling bonds,
That I might hurl that lean, swart face,
So idly turning towards us,
With thin curled lips,
And cold, incurious eyes,
To headlong death—
Yea ! even though I tumbled
The towers of Babylon round about my head.
And, when our captors bowed their foreheads low,
Obsequious to the throne,
I stood upright,
And gazed my loathing on that listless form—
The gay, embroidered robe,
The golden cap, that pranked the crisped locks,

AKRA THE SLAVE

The short, square beard, new-oiled and barbered—
But, in a flash,
A heavy blow
Fell on my head,
And struck me to my knees
Before the sleek, indifferent king.
And then, on either hand,
With gripping palms upon my shoulders set,
The Nubians towered above me
Like mighty men of stone.
And savagely I struggled,
Half-stunned, to rise again ;
When, as I vainly battled
In their unrelenting clutch,
My eyes lit for the first time on the Queen,
Who sat upon the daïs, by her lord
Half-shadowed, on a throne of ivory,
And all the hate died in me, as I saw
The face that hovered over me in dream,
When I had slept beneath the low-boughed cedar :
The moon-pale brows, o'er which the clustered hair
Hung like the smoke of torches, ruddy-gold,
Against a canopy of peacock plumes :
The deep brown, burning eyes,
From which the soul looked on me in fierce pity.
And, as I gazed on that exultant beauty,
The hunter and the slayer of men
Was slain within me instantly,
And I forgot the mountains and my home ;
My desolate mother, and my father's death ;
My captive sisters . . . and the thronèd King !
I was as one, that moment,
New-born into the world

AKRA THE SLAVE

Full-limbed and thewed,
Yet, with the wondering heart
Of earth-bewildered childhood.
And, unto me, it seemed
That, as the Queen looked down on me,
There stole into her eyes
Some dim remembrance of old dreams,
That in their brown depths flickered
With strange, elusive light,
Like stars that tremble in still forest-pools.
One spake—
I scarce knew whom, nor cared—
And bade me choose,
Before the throne,
Between a life of slavery,
Or merciful, swift death—
Death, that but a moment since,
I would have dragged, exulting, on me—
And with my eyes still set on the Queen's face,
I answered :
“ I will serve ” :
And scarcely heeded that my wrists were loosed.

And, huddled in a stifling hut,
That night, among my fellows,
I could not sleep at all :
But gazed, wild-eyed, till dawn upon that face,
Which hovered o'er me, like the moon of dreams ;
And seemed to draw the wandering tides of life
In one vast wave, which ever strove
To climb the heavens wherein she moved,
That it might break in triumphing foam about her.
Not then, nor ever afterwards,

AKRA THE SLAVE

Was I a slave, among my fellow-slaves,
But one, who, with mean drudgery,
And daily penance serves
Before a holy altar,
That, sometimes, as he labours, his glad eyes
May catch a gleam of the immortal light
Within the secret shrine ;
Yea ! and, maybe, shall look, one day, with trembling,
On the bright-haired, imperishable god.
And, even when, day after day,
I bore the big reed-baskets, laden
With wet clay, digged beyond the Western moat,
Although I seemed to tread,
As treads the ox that turns the water-wheel,
A blindfold round of servitude,
My quenchless vision ever burned before me :
And when, in after days, I fed
The roaring oven-furnaces ;
And toiled by them through sweltering days,
Though over me, at times, would come
Great longing for the hill-tops,
And the noise of torrent-waters :
Or when, more skilled, I moulded
The damp clay into bricks ;
And spread the colour and the glaze ;
And in strength-giving heat of glowing kilns,
I baked them durable,
Clean-shaped, and meet for service :
My vision flamed yet brighter ;
And unto me it seemed
As if my gross and useless clay were burned
In a white ecstasy of lustral fire,
That, in the fashioning of the house of love,

AKRA THE SLAVE

I might serve perfectly the builder's need.
Thus, many months, I laboured ;
Till, one day, at the noontide hour of rest,
I lay ; and with a sharpened reed—
As temple-scribes write down the holy lore
On tablets of wet clay—
On the moist earth beside me,
I limned a young fawn, cropping
A bunch of tender, overhanging leaves.
And, as I slowly drew,
I dreamt a little sadly of the days,
When I, too, roamed, untethered,
And drinking in, unquestioning,
The sunshine and the air,
And all the rapture of the earth that turns,
New every morning to the wondering sun,
Refashioned in still nights of starry dew :
But one, the while, unseen of me,
Watched my unconscious hand, approving :
And I was set, next morning,
Among the craftsmen, who so deftly limned
The hunts and battles for the palace walls.
And, happily, with them I lived
A life of loving labour, for each line
Flowed from the knowledge of my heart :
I drew the startled ostrich
Fleeing from the far-flung noose :
The brindled lynx ; the onaga
In dewy-plashing flight ;
The bristling boar, at bay,
Crouched in a deadly ring of threatening spears,
With streaming nostrils, and red eyes ablaze ;
The striped hyæna ; the gaunt, green-eyed wolf ;

AKRA THE SLAVE

The skulking jackal ; the grey, brush-tailed fox ;
The hunting leopard and the antelope,
In mid-chase tense,
With every thew astrain ;
The dappled panther ; the brown-eyed gazelle,
Butting with black horns through the tangled brake ;
The nimble hare, alert, with pricked-up ears ;
The tiger, crouched, with yellow eyes afire ;
The shaggy mountain-goat,
Perched on the utmost crag,
Against the afterglow of lucent ruby,
Or, poised with bunching hoofs
In mid-spring over a dark, yawning chasm ;
Or the black stallion, with his tameless troop,
Fording a mountain-river in the dawn.
And, sometimes, as we toiled,
A terrible fleeting rapture
Would come upon me, when the Queen
Passed by us with her maidens ;
Or paused, a moment, gazing,
With tranced and kindling eyes upon our labours :
But never did I dare, at any time,
To lift my eyes to hers,
And look, as soul on soul,
As on the day her beauty brought to birth
The strange new life within me.
In silence she would ever leave us ;
And ever with her passing perished
The light and colour of my work ;
So that my heart failed, daunted by that glimpse
Of the ever-living beauty.
And, sometimes, I would carve in ruddy teak,
Or ivory, from the Indian merchants bought,

AKRA THE SLAVE

Or in the rare, black basalt, little beasts
To please the idle fancies of the King ;
Or model in wet clay, and cast in bronze,
Great bulls and lions for the palace-courts ;
Or carve him seals of lapis-lazuli,
Of jasper, amethyst and serpentine,
Chalcedony—carnelian, chrysoprase,
Agate, sardonyx, and chalcedonyx—
Green jade, and alabaster ;
Or cut in stones that flashed and flickered
Like a glancing kingfisher,
Or, in the sun-filled amber,
The kite with broad wings spread,
Or little fluttering doves that pecked
A golden bunch of dates :
And then of these in settings of fine gold
Made fillets, rings and ear-rings.

Thus, one day,
Dreaming, as ever, of the Queen,
I wrought a golden serpent for her hair :
And when I brought it to the King, next morn,
Where he sat brooding over chess,
He bade me bear it to the Queen, myself,
And so, I went unto her, where she sat,
Among her singing maidens, at the loom,
Weaving a silken web of Tyrian dye.
I laid the trinket at her feet, in silence :
And she arose, and set it in her hair,
Whose living lustre far outshone
The cold, dead metal I had fashioned,
As she stood before me, dreaming,
In her robe of flowing blue ;

AKRA THE SLAVE

Then looked a moment on me with kind eyes.
And though she spoke no word,
I turned, and fled, in trembling,
Before the light that shivered through me,
And struck my soul with shuddering ecstasy :
And, still, through many days,
Although I did not look again
Upon those dreaming eyes,
Their visionary light
Within my soul, revealed eternity.

Thus, have the mortal years
Flowed onward to the perfect end—
This day of days,
That never night shall quench,
Nor darkness vanquish :
And, at dawn,
I die.

And yet, this morning, as I slowly climbed
The steep, ascending stages
That lead up to the hanging-gardens—
Where, tier on tier,
The great brick arches bore
Their April wealth of blossoms,
Plumed with palm and dusky cypress—
I little knew that I
Who came to carve a garland
Round a fountain's porphyry basin,
Should scale so soon the utmost peak of life.
Throughout the morn I toiled,
Until an hour ere noon—
For no one, save the King and Queen,

AKRA THE SLAVE

May walk in those high gardens, after midday—
When, underneath a cypress shade,
I paused, a moment, resting ;
And looking down upon the basking city,
Beneath me slumbering deeply—
Garden on garden glowing, grove on grove,
Like some green fabric, shot with myriad hues,
And chequered with white clusters of flat roofs,
Aquiver in clear heat :
And then I gazed up through the aching azure,
At the restless kites that hover
Ever over Babylon :
And, as I watched one broad-winged bird that hung
Above the seven-coloured pyramid
Of Bel's great temple,
With wide pinions spread,
As though it kept eternal vigil over
The golden image in the golden shrine,
I thought of eagles poised
Above the peaks of glittering snows,
Beyond the Eastern plains.
Half-dreaming, thus, I lay,
Lulled by the tinkling waters,
Till, unawares, sleep slowly overcame me ;
And noonday drifted by :
And still, I slept, unheeding :
And, in my sleep,
I looked on Beauty in a quiet place
Of forest gloom and immemorial dream :
When, something rousing me from slumber,
With waking eyes that yet seemed dream-enchanted,
I looked upon the Queen,
Where, in a secret close,

AKRA THE SLAVE

Set thickly round with screens of yew and ilex,
She stood upon the dark, broad brim
Of a wide granite basin, gazing down,
With dreaming eyes, into the glooming cool,
Unraimented, save of the flickering gleam,
Reflected from the lucent waters,
That flowed before her silently :
And slowly, from her feet,
The cold light rippled up her body, till,
Entangled in the meshes of her hair,
It flooded the calm rapture of her face :
When, dreaming still, she lifted up her eyes,
Unseeing ; and I looked upon her soul,
Unveiled, in naked immortality,
Untrammelled by the trappings of brief time,
And cloaks of circumstance.
How long I looked upon the perfect beauty,
I cannot tell—
Each moment, flowing to eternity,
Bearing me further from time's narrow shores ;
Though, yet, a little while,
From those unshadowed deeps time sought to hold me.

Suddenly, I felt
A ghostly arrow pierce my life ;
And I leapt up, and turning,
I saw the King beside me,
With steely, glittering eyes
Shooting barbèd anger,
Though he coldly spake,
With evil, curling lips :
“ Slave, thou art dead ! ”
And yet I did not quail :

AKRA THE SLAVE

But, looking 'twixt his brows,
I answered : and he blenched before my words :
"Nay ! I have seen :
"And am newborn, a King !"
And then his craven fingers
Went quaking to his wagging beard,
As if he felt my clutch upon his throat :
Yet, though, with one quick blow,
I might have hurled him down to death,
I never stirred :
And, eyeing me, he summoned
The negro-eunuchs, who kept watch below :
But I, ere they could spring up the first stage,
Went forth to meet them ;
And they bound my wrists.

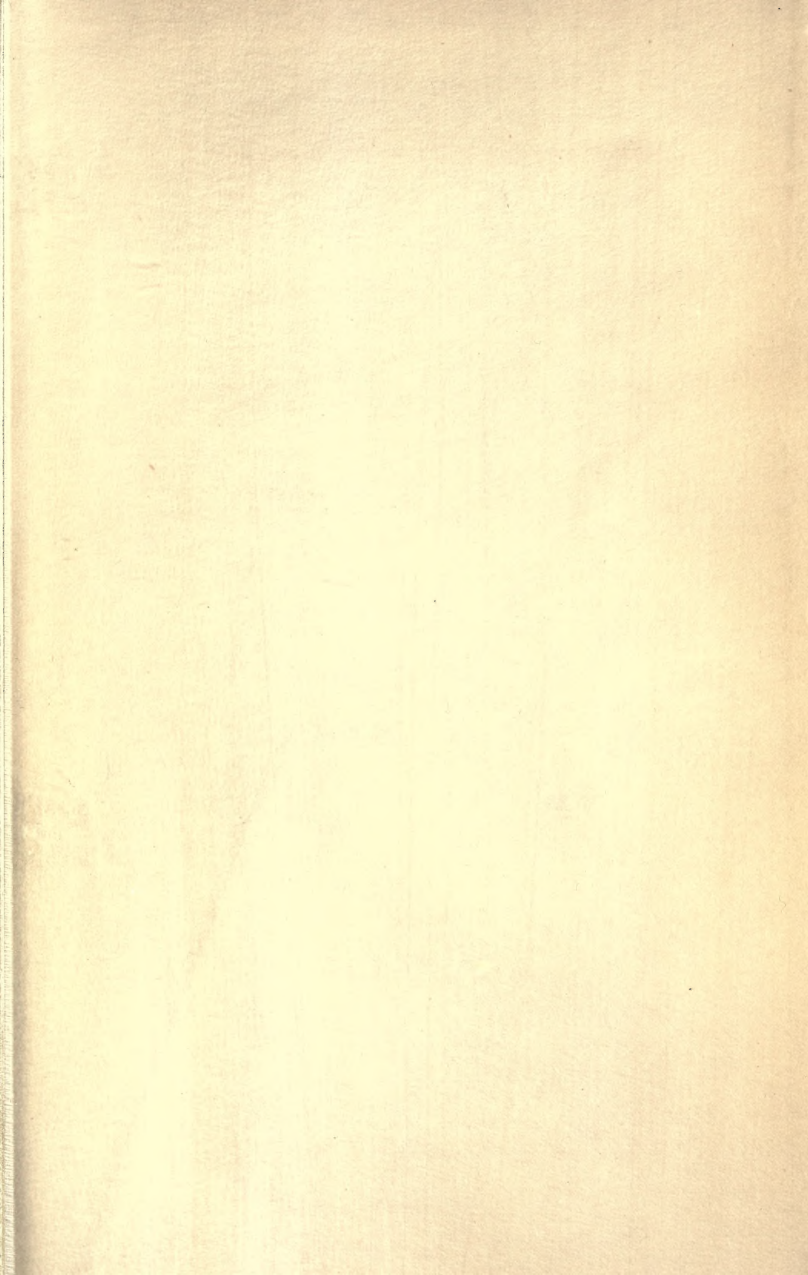
And so, down from the hills, my life has flowed,
Until, at fullest flood, it meets the sea.
With calm and unregretful heart, I wait
Till dawn shall loose the arrow from the bow.
I, who, with eager, faltering hand have sought
To fashion a little beauty, in the end,
Have looked on the perfect beauty, and I die—
Even as the priest, who, in the heart of night,
Trembling before the thunder-riven shrine,
Looks on the face of God, and perishes.
I die . . .

And yet, maybe, when earth lies heavily
Upon the time-o'ertopped towers,
And tumbled walls, and broken gates of brass ;
And the winds whisper one another :
"Where, Oh ! where is Babylon ?"
In the dim underworld of dreaming shades,

AKRA THE SLAVE

My soul shall seek out beauty
And look, once more,
Upon the unveiled vision . . .
And not die.

Night passes : and already in the court,
Amid the splash of fountains,
There sounds the pad of naked feet approaching.
With slow, deliberate pace,
As though they trod out all my perished years,
The Nubians come, to lead me out to death.
Slowly the great door opens ;
And clearer comes the call of waters ;
Cool airs are on my brow . . .
Lo ! . . . in the East, the dawn.



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Akra the slave

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